

Scalpel, Please

Assuredly, every rational American ought to bestow a pish and a couple of tuts on this John Birch Society. Calling Eisenhower a Communist! And John Foster Dulles! And even Gumshoe Allen! It deserves as severe a tut-tutting as Eisenhower gave Joe McCarthy when he called George C. Marshall a traitor. Come to think of it, though, Eisenhower decided not to say a word in that case; so let it go that the John Birch Society deserves a worse tut-tutting than McCarthy got.

The John Birch Society also deserves its day in court. The Mafia, the Purple Gang, the worst imaginable combination of hoodlums deserves its day in court, including the right to present its defense and to expose the lies, if any, of the witnesses against it. But since this right is not recognized in a typical investigation by the Un-American Activities Committee, not even the John Birch Society should be subjected to the Committee's typical investigation.

To be sure, steps should be taken to make public the objective, provable facts about this or any other organization that seeks to influence public opinion. For instance, who puts up the money?

Then, again, who writes the propaganda? For instance, who called Eisenhower a Communist? If it were shown that the author was some man of sense, with a reputation for probity, the charge might be serious. But we all know that the country is full of scribes -- some of them, unfortunately, shrewd fellows -- whose pens are for sale to the highest bidder, and not a very high bidder at that. Some of them, for a dollar and a half in hand paid will cheerfully insult God, country and Yale, and boast of it.

An investigation that will bring out the facts is most desirable; but its record does not suggest that the Un-American Activities Committee can conduct one. Chairman Walter, indeed, professed at the start to see no need for any investigation, and a man who thinks it useless is not likely to make his inquiry very thorough.

Outraged Republicans, seeing how this stick has tarred their party from top to bottom, are shouting for punitive action. This is understandable, but its wisdom is open to question. It may be plausibly argued that there is a place for the John Birch Society in our political system as it is at present constituted. We have no political equivalent of the antibiotics that have revolutionized the practice of medicine in recent years, nothing that will eliminate pathogenic organisms from the

blood stream. As far as the human body is concerned, in the days before penicillin *et seq.*, there was a place for the carbuncle. Dangerous and painful as it was, it did draw together and encyst in one spot toxic sources that might otherwise have permeated the whole system.

In every large society there is an anti-social element, a vestigial reminder from early history or pre-history, as useless as the vermiform appendix in the body and carrying the same menace of sudden inflammation, suppuration and rupture. We have had Know-Nothingism, Ku Kluxism and McCarthyism. In every case, recovery came only after the thing had become concentrated enough to be lanced, usually by the blade of public ridicule. Possibly the John Birch Society is such a concentration. If that is the case, civilized Republicans need not view it with too much alarm. After all, opposition to the modernization of American political policy has been endemic in their party, producing local symptoms at points as widely separated as Goldwater in Arizona and this man Welch in Massachusetts. It harried Eisenhower throughout his eight years in the White House. It was the nemesis of Nixon. Without ever becoming violent, it has kept the party too sick to gain control of Congress except for two brief intervals in thirty-one years. But in the whole range of political therapeutics there was no known way of eliminating it without killing the party.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, this John Birch movement signalizes the drawing together of all those poison-generating organisms into one huge carbuncle. The situation would still be serious, Heaven knows. Such an affliction on Uncle Sam's neck might well cause him to remember McCarthyism as a mere pimple; and yet it could be the precursor of a healthier day, for carbuncles can be removed.

However, all experience shows that their successful treatment is by surgery, not by butchery. Agitated Republicans hoping to save their party must be careful to pick up a scalpel, not a cleaver; and the keenest of scalpels is humor. The original John Birch, they say, was a disciple of a once-celebrated Texas cleric whom Mencken habitually referred to as the Rev. Two-Gun Norris, in view of the fact that he twice stood trial, once for burning his own church, and once for shooting one of his parishioners. Such a background offers ample opportunity to modern GOP satirists. If they are equal to it, the party has little to fear from this threat.